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The reel truth: the importance of historical accuracy in film

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THE REEL TRUTH:
THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL ACCURACY IN FILM

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By
Kyle A. Jenkins
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ABSTRACT

The first goal of this project is to build a case that historical accuracy in film is an especially important criteria when teaching using film, and that educators and their students should be able to discuss any historical inaccuracies in a way that does not diminish enjoyment of the film. Aside from students, there should also be an expectation from the general populous that when a film claims to be historically accurate its inaccuracies should not be harmful to the overall conversation. Secondly, this project will attempt to build criteria for critiquing and analyzing a film based on balanced criteria of historical accuracy and enjoyability. And thirdly, I will apply that criteria to some more recent films, thereby judging their usefulness as teaching tools as well as show how certain films “do” better history than others.

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Introduction

When teaching history, educators have a variety of tools at their disposal to help their students better understand the past. Of these tools, film is one of the more useful at keeping the attention of students in a class where otherwise they may not feel as engaged. For instance, to help students understand the Normandy landings on D-Day, one may find it prudent to show the beginning of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Though the story presented is primarily fictional, it is set during actual historical events and considered by many to be the most accurate "on-screen" rendition of D-Day itself. Of course, there are still some major historical inaccuracies with how Spielberg presents the rest of the fictional story, especially regarding the attitudes of the soldiers presented in the film. So, how important is historical accuracy in filmmaking?

In the grand scheme of making a film and putting it out, the answer is not much. Filmmaking is a business; therefore, the primary goal is to make money. However, as historical films can be a major draw to the box office, filmmakers also do what they can to ensure that they can earn some sort of approval from the academic community. They want someone to tell them that yes, their film is at least relatively accurate, so that they can market it in such a way that draws in larger crowds. In a conversation between film director John Sayles and historian Eric Foner for the book *Past Imperfect*, a collection of essays on historical accuracy in film, both men reveal some insights from their respective points of view. Foner asked Sayles whether filmmakers care about how historians think of their films. Sayles' belief was that such things were, "generally of little concern," and

that as long as films as presented felt, “true to the spirit of the story,” then it became unnecessary to get all of the facts correct.¹

However, Foner and Sayles both agreed there was a, “certain power” in presenting history accurately. “I’ve heard producers say many, many times that the only way a movie is going to work is if the ad says, ‘Based on a true story,’” muses Sayles. “Audiences appreciate the fact that something really happened. Whether they are thinking that it did or knowing that it did. That gives the film a certain legitimacy.”² Foner partially concurs with this, describing an instance when he was called in to watch a screening of *Glory* (1989) and give a statement from a historian’s point of view. After giving his statement, the producers balked at Foner’s assessment and told him they wanted him to say that the film was accurate. Foner responded by telling them he could not do that as, “what *I* mean by accurate is not exactly the same thing as what *they* meant by accurate.” Foner admits that overall, the film was generally accurate but with many smaller historical inaccuracies. Not getting what they wanted out of Foner, the producers of *Glory* found someone else to write a statement on the film, just to acquire that “Historically Accurate” seal from a noted historian.³

From this conversation between Foner and Sayles we gather a few things. A historical film does not necessarily need to be one hundred percent accurate for it to be a good film, but it can be difficult to acquire a historian’s seal of approval if their version of accurate differs from what a filmmaker considers accurate. So, what of using film as a teaching tool? Matt C. Carnes, primary editor and compiler of *Past Imperfect* gave his

¹ Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1995), 16.

² Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 17.

³ *Ibid.*

thoughts in an article for American film magazine *Cinéaste* where he suggested that “the history teacher who assumes the role of movie critic . . . risks alienating students.”

Carnes then goes on to describe his own method of using film to teach history. “First, we give filmmakers abundant (and usually well deserved) credit for their attention to visual detail. But then, rather than praise or criticize films on the basis of their ‘historical accuracy,’ we use films to illuminate larger historical issues.”⁴ Carnes almost seems to regret his work on *Past Imperfect*, as he believes many people, “regarded it as a bit of a downer,” to learn that the history presented in the films they enjoyed were not accurate.⁵ This led Carnes to begin using film in the way illustrated above, giving credit where credit is due and then exploring the larger issues.

Carnes is not the only historian to give his opinion on how best to utilize film in the classroom. Debra Donnelly in her article “Using Feature Film in the Teaching of History,” does not try to discredit Carnes directly, though she does take much more of a hard line against passively analyzing films without also explicitly exposing, assessing, and amending the “historical liberties” they take⁶. “If students only passively engage with the film and are not required to deeply investigate and respond to it as an historical artefact, then films run the same risk as internet searches, computer slide shows and other technology: that of being a distraction from historical literacy skills.”⁷ Paul Weinstein concurs with Carnes’ belief that film can be used most effectively as a means for engaging with the “big picture” of the history presented, though also states that,

⁴ Mark C. Carnes, “Shooting (Down) The Past: Historians vs. Hollywood,” *Cinéaste* , 2004, 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Debra Donnelly, “Using Feature Film in the Teaching of History: The Practitioner Decision-Making Dynamic,” *Journal of International Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“[d]econstructing a film can only help in abstracting and analyzing the images that pepper their [students] days.”⁸ Steven Mintz in a chapter for *Hollywood’s America*, contends that nitpicking or obsessing over inaccuracies, “does little to help us understand why a historical film might resonate with the audience at a particular time,” or otherwise, “how a film might cause us to critically reflect on the past.”⁹ Mintz does agree, however, that movies can often be more useful than books when it comes to helping students visualize the past in an effective way.

There is worth to Carnes’ philosophy of teaching using film, though in many ways it is fundamentally flawed. Carnes worries of alienating students if the teacher takes on the role of a film critic, but film presents itself to society and *is* criticized. Though the film industry does exist to make money, film as art exists to be viewed, analyzed, and critiqued. Indeed, teachers should not be showing historical films to their classes and then immediately afterward begin dressing down every single inaccurate point. However, they should be encouraging and helping their students to analyze and be critical of the medium presenting history to them. Educators need not set themselves up as insufferable nitpickers, instead working together with their students to critique films based on their historical content. This can easily be accomplished if the educator sets up clear criteria that integrates both historical accuracy and standard film analysis such as production design.

Carnes’ article comes from the early 2000s, and film has become (if possible) even more of a prevalent pop culture medium for society. As Weinstein aptly put it,

⁸ Paul B. Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project,” *The History Teacher* 35, no. 1 (November 2001): 31.

⁹ Steven Mintz, Randy Roberts, and David Welky, *Hollywood’s America: Understanding History through Film* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 393.

“Today’s classroom is less than ever insulated from the cultural environment, and we cannot ignore the pervasiveness of electronic mass media.”¹⁰ It is not far-fetched to suggest that many people, even after secondary school, get much of their knowledge of historical events from pop culture. An average person is not going to go the movie theater and then rush out to purchase or borrow a few books on a subject to continue expanding their knowledge. Instead they may do a cursory search on sources like Wikipedia to read up a bit on the film itself and what it is based on and simply leave it at that. For students in a classroom, however, the use of film should be a stepping-stone through which they and their professors can, “gain an increased appreciation of the power of mass media to shape perception and to affect interpretations of the past. This heightened awareness should enable them to be more discriminating in processing the images and information bombarding them daily.”¹¹

Film is a form of media that all people can relate to, and historical film is often the most accessible way for the people to interact with history. If the average person does not understand why they should question what they are shown on screen, particularly if presented with a claim of authenticity, then it falls to historians to help educate those people about the veracity of historical film. In that way, this paper will first show how historical film can color public perception of the events they portray in both positive and negative ways. If we can conclude that, then it becomes obvious that the best way to help the average person analyze historical film is to start in history classes from secondary school and beyond. Teaching how to critically analyze a film while still accepting that film based on its entertainment value can assuage any fears of alienating students or

¹⁰ Weinstein, “Movies as the Gateway,” 27.

¹¹ Weinstein, “Movies as Gateway,” 31

ruining their experience of watching a film. By then studying how other historians have approached using film as a teaching tool, we can move on towards developing standard criteria for educators and students to analyze film in a history classroom.

1.1 Historical Accuracy and Public Perception

If a film has presented itself as “based on a true story” or “inspired by actual events” then the people who see it expect that they are seeing something that is at least mostly accurate. It is perfectly acceptable to look over certain small historical inaccuracies for the sake of making a cohesive and entertaining film, but what happens when the film’s portrayal of history is so inaccurate that Carnes’ “larger historical issues” are missed? What happens when a film purports to show the truth and people accept that at face value without realizing that there are major inaccuracies? Also, what if the inaccuracies included in the film are detrimental or harmful to how people think about that history? To answer these questions, it is easiest to take a deep dive into a few films with some problematic inaccuracies. First, we will investigate Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997).

The climax of the film opens with an imposing line of Supreme Court justices sitting at the high table. The gavel bangs against the table and those present in the courtroom sit before John Quincy Adams as he rises and begins his monologue.

“Why are we here?” he begins as he slowly builds his case. “How is it that a simple, plain property issue should now find itself so ennobled as to be argued before the Supreme Court of the United States of America?”¹² Adams is here to argue the case of Joseph Cinque and his fellow Mende tribesmen who successfully rebelled and

¹² *Amistad*. DVD. United States: DreamWorks Pictures, 2006.

commandeered the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad* after having been abducted for the slave trade. Cinque, dressed in fine clothes and sitting alongside those who have chosen to aid him in the quest for freedom, listens and watches Adams's every move, as the former U.S. President continues his speech. Adams demands the Supreme Court not bow to the whims of the 11-year-old Queen Isabella of Spain, as she has already mocked the courts of the United States as incompetent. He lambasts sitting president Martin Van Buren and his own former Vice President John C. Calhoun as those who would scrape to defend slavery and return the Mende to those who captured them.

"Well, gentlemen, I differ with the keen minds of the South, and with our president, who apparently shares their views, offering that the natural state of mankind is instead – and I know this is a controversial idea – is freedom." Adams directs the attention of the court to Cinque and introduces him as a hero who, were he white, would not be in the courtroom on this day. He invokes the Declaration of Independence and using some inspiration from a conversation with Cinque the night before, advises the Supreme Court to do what the Mende do when they have no hope... invoke their ancestors.

"James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams. We have long resisted asking for your guidance." Adams gets quieter as he approaches a bust of his father, the second President of the United States. "We understand now . . . we've been made to understand, and to embrace the understanding that who we are is who we were. We desperately need your strength and wisdom to, . . . give us the courage to do what is right."¹³ Adams ends his monologue

¹³ *Amistad*, Spielberg.

with this appeal to invoke the memories of the past to help decide for the future. As the final moments play, the Court rules in favor of the Mende tribesmen and determines to allow them to seek passage back to their African homeland and we cut away to a slave fortress being destroyed by cannon fire.

Is that not a lovely story? A former U.S. President and sitting representative, the son of the second U.S. President, giving a rousing speech to determine the fates of those who were trapped in bondage, but who freed themselves through their own power. It invokes imagery of the past, and the fervent patriotism, sense of freedom, and independence of the Revolutionary War. There is only one problem, that really is not how it happened.

In *Amistad*, Anthony Hopkins gives a wonderful performance as John Quincy Adams, the former sixth president and a man who seemed to refuse to retire. It is easy to believe that Hopkins really is the venerable and grumpy lawyer standing up to the Supreme Court and current presidential administration as he is such a phenomenal actor. The rest of the cast also plays their roles incredibly well. Djimon Hounsou as Joseph Cinque gives an air of pride and nobility, a warrior who wants to lead his people home. Matthew McConaughey as Roger Sherman Brown, the original lawyer on the case in the lower courts, sits as enraptured as the rest by Adams's speech. Morgan Freeman, Stellan Skarsgard, Pete Postlewaithe, round out the principal cast present in this final courtroom scene. It is a scene that had this author nearly in tears, evoking the emotional response that director Spielberg undoubtedly hoped for. But all of this is simply theater. Some facts are correct, while others are tweaked or modified from actual history.

Though a fantastic film that illustrates a portion of American history that is not well known, *Amistad* takes many liberties with its portrayal of the events of *United States v. Schooner Amistad*. Hopkins' wonderful speech gives the impression that the case was settled within a day, when in reality his argument was spaced over multiple days, and the film version (though emotionally charged and well presented) doesn't even summarize Adams's actual argument. If you watch *Amistad*, you might be led to believe that the film and the case it is based on was an indictment against slavery in the United States. Not a difficult sell as the entire Adams family were always well-known abolitionists, so it would make sense for Hopkins' character to embody that. However, the *Amistad* case as presented to the Supreme Court argued more against the Atlantic Slave Trade than the actual institution of slavery.

Eric Foner gave a review of the film listing his many issues with the finished product:

Amistad presents a highly misleading account of the case's historical significance, in the process sugarcoating the relationship between the American judiciary and slavery. The film gives the distinct impression that the Supreme Court was convinced by Adams' plea to repudiate slavery in favor of the natural rights of man, thus taking a major step on the road to abolition. In fact, the *Amistad* case revolved around the Atlantic slave trade — by 1840 outlawed by international treaty — and had nothing whatsoever to do with slavery as a domestic institution.¹⁴

Foner's criticism is not the only one leveled at this lesser-known Spielberg film, but it is the most glaring in terms of true historical accuracy. Hopkins's speech serves as a summation of the trial but still gets across the point that leads to the conclusion of the film. Though the Mende tribesmen won the case and the film makes it look as if they will

¹⁴ Eric Foner, "The Amistad Case in Fact and Film," HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, March 1998, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/74>.

receive governmental support to return home, instead they had to raise most if not all of the money themselves after being deemed free. This criticism is legitimate, but small in comparison to the potentially harmful representation pointed out by Foner.

As presented, *Amistad* serves as a film driven by a strong cast about white male abolitionists acting as the saviors for a group of tribesmen that happened to find themselves captured not only by slavers, but also by the United States government. The film makes most of the argument about slavery and constantly mentions an impending “civil war” even though the Civil War itself would not take place until twenty years after the events of *Amistad*. No, the true tale of *Amistad* makes the case against the *importation* of slaves, not the domestic institution within the United States at that time. While this is inaccurate to the history of *La Amistad*, it is not necessarily harmful to the overall discussion. Therefore, we can determine that *Amistad*, though flawed in its portrayal of the importance of this historic case, is still useful in the classroom as long those flaws are discussed.

With pop culture being as pervasive as it is, if the inaccuracies included in the film change or exclude portions of fact, that could be detrimental to the general understanding of those events. Obviously not everyone is a historian or a student of history. As with *Amistad*, the original importance of things can get lost in Hollywood’s retelling, but more egregious examples also exist in the form of pseudo-documentaries like *JFK* (1991) and historical fiction like *The Patriot* (2000).

Oliver Stone’s *JFK* is a political thriller that combines footage of actors playing historical figures along with documentary stylistic choices. Despite being, “widely excoriated by politicians, commentators, and scholars as a preposterous, even alarming,

deformation of reality,”¹⁵ *JFK* is well made and received critical acclaim for its cast and production. However, Stone took many liberties in the presentation of what is essentially a feature film conspiracy theory. Based on a book by Jim Garrison, a Louisiana District Attorney famous for his investigations into the Kennedy assassination, *JFK* presents a version of events that teeter on the edge of believability. “According to *JFK*, LBJ and a cast of hundreds killed Kennedy to keep America in Vietnam,”¹⁶ writes Joseph Roquemore in *History Goes to the Movies*. It should be noted that within Roquemore’s book he rates films one to five stars based on their historical accuracy. *JFK* receives zero stars. By including documentary-like footage within the film, Stone created a film that many in the audience might confuse for presenting nothing but fact. While Stone himself agrees that he engages in, “distorting details of his stories as understood by historians,” he defends films like *JFK* as a form of “cinematic history.” Stone believes his art shows a, “‘deeper’ truth— as it were, a truth below mere surface fact.”¹⁷

If we return to the conversation between Eric Foner and John Sayles, Foner cringes at the thought of how many people might believe that, “Jim Garrison had the assassination all figured out.”¹⁸ He continues, “I thought that film was a brilliant example of manipulation of the highest order.”¹⁹ Sayles concurs, adding that with the creation of new footage that mimicked the look and feel of actual documentary footage, “you couldn’t really figure out where the ‘real’ documentary footage left off and the ‘new’

¹⁵ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 270.

¹⁶ Joseph H. Roquemore, *History Goes to the Movies: a Viewer's Guide to the Best (and Some of the Worst) Historical Films Ever Made* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2000), 251.

¹⁷ Richard Francaviglia and Jerome Rodnitzky, eds., *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁸ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*,

¹⁹ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 23

documentary footage began.” Sayles also wonders if perhaps Stone must have thought that because his invented footage made for such a good story it might be true.²⁰ “Unless you came to that film with a very strong sense of history, having done a lot of research,” he muses, “you get swept up, and at least for the world of that film, for those three hours, you buy it.”²¹

JFK was released in the early 1990s, and though there are still many questions about the Kennedy assassination, Stone’s film gives the impression that they (meaning Garrison as well as Stone) had figured all of it out and were sharing those findings with audiences in the movie theaters. Watching *JFK* is like watching the birth of a major conspiracy theory that suggests foul play on the part of Lyndon B. Johnson and others in a scandalous attempt to keep the U.S. in the Vietnam war. To this day many conspiracy theories run wild about the death of John F. Kennedy, and surely Stone’s film did not help in that.

Another film that gives a harmfully inaccurate version of history is the Roland Emmerich film *The Patriot*. Despite being a fictional story set during the American Revolution, *The Patriot* tries to set itself up as being inspired by events and people from that period. While audiences are treated to a very standard good vs. evil plotline, any historian worth their salt knows there is more at play.

In the film Mel Gibson portrays Benjamin Martin, a planter from South Carolina. According to the filmmakers, the character of Martin is an amalgam of several historical characters, with a lot of inspiration for his tactics in war coming from Francis Marion also known as The Swamp Fox. Heath Ledger plays Gabriel, the oldest of Martin’s seven

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 24.

children, who rushes off to join the Continental Army in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. Martin and his family come up against the cruel Colonel William Tavington, played by Jason Isaacs, who is in turn based of Sir Banastre Tarleton, a British officer who was noted for his cruelty in warfare.²²

Gibson's Martin is brought into the war after one of his sons is brutally executed by Tavington at their plantation home. Benjamin and Gabriel fight for the Continental Army, and Benjamin must watch as his eldest son is also slain by Tavington. Everything culminates in a final fight known as the Battle of Cowpens, where Benjamin Martin finally slays Tavington and gets revenge for his dead sons. Shortly after this, the Siege of Yorktown takes place and General Charles Cornwallis is brought to surrender. Much of the background set up in this film is very accurate, with filmmakers consulting Smithsonian experts on the costuming and prop work for the film. Though the portrayed characters are fictionalized, the events at large are mostly accurate though the Battle of Cowpens has been conflated with the similar Battle of Guilford Courthouse.

At first glance, *The Patriot* may seem to be nothing more than a dramatized version of the Revolutionary War from the point of view of one man, and because Benjamin Martin and William Tavington are inspired by real people, we can overlook inaccuracies in their characterization because they themselves were not real people. However, there are still multiple scenes in the film that give historians pause. Most egregious of these is when British troops, led by Tavington, are seen burning down a church with innocent civilians inside. Nothing like this is ever reported to have happened

²² *The Patriot* (Columbia Pictures, 2000).

during the American Revolution, with Jonathan Forman of *Salon* comparing the actions taken by the British in film to the German SS troops in World War II.²³

The Patriot also seems to forget about slaves. Benjamin Martin lives on a plantation in South Carolina during the Colonial Era and does not own slaves? He simply has free blacks living on his plantation working for him. This decision led to criticism from other filmmakers like Spike Lee, and even drew criticism from Mel Gibson himself. “For three hours *The Patriot* dodged around, skirted about or completely ignored slavery,” wrote Lee in a letter to the editor of *The Hollywood Reporter*, “pure, blatant American Hollywood propaganda. A complete whitewashing of history.”²⁴

Whitewashing can be defined as a deliberate attempt to conceal unpleasant or incriminating facts. More films get accused of this every year, as characters based on people of color are cast using white actors, or when films like *The Patriot* (which does have a nearly three-hour run time) choose not to even engage with unpleasant concepts like slavery. By removing those voices, the filmmakers do a disservice to the history they were trying to depict while they simultaneously did so well in other aspects of the film. Also, the portrayal of a British officer committing such egregious wartime atrocities as murdering children, unarmed civilians, and prisoners of war, is detrimental not only to the history being portrayed but also to modern-day relationships with the United Kingdom. It begins to draw comparisons to more modern wars and while atrocities were committed during The American Revolution, nothing to the scope of what is shown in *The Patriot* is known to have happened.

²³ Jonathan Foreman, “The Nazis, Er, the Redcoats Are Coming!,” *Salon* (*Salon*, September 26, 2011), www.salon.com.

²⁴ “Spike Lee Slams Patriot,” *The Guardian* (*Guardian News and Media*, July 6, 2000), www.theguardian.com.

How film can affect public perception of history is not always abundantly clear. It depends on a variety of outlying factors like how popular the movie is and how much it gets talked about after its initial theater run. Some people are more likely to engage with it than others. In the student newspaper *Nouse* at the University of York, contributor Sam Wallace wrote a piece on the importance of historical accuracy from his point of view as a consumer of film. Wallace opines that when a film is based on a book, “you're doing the source material a disservice,” if you disregard the nuances of that book particularly if you ignore things that just as easily could have been included. In the same way, regardless of artistic license, “if history is the source,” being used for a film, then the filmmakers, “have an obligation to get that right.” Wallace does not expect all historical film to be completely accurate, but when film makes the bold claim of being accurate and then leaves out certain facts or events, then audiences are being deceived. “Historical accuracy in our media, especially if it claims to be historical, is important because it can shape people's perceptions of what parts of history were like.”²⁵

Study of how people perceive history based on film is not limited to film historians. The psychological impact of inaccurate information in film is also considered. Steven Mintz identifies at least five psychological mechanisms which Americans use to purposefully avoid reconciling their past with the present or how film can color the perception of said Americans towards their interaction with history. Mintz uses Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) as his prime example, however the mechanisms named expand beyond animated “history.” Screen memory, “a recollection of early childhood that is falsely recalled or magnified in importance, masking other memories of deeper

²⁵ Sam Wallace, “Film Meets Fact - Why Is Historical Accuracy Important?,” *Nouse* (Muse, January 13, 2016), nouse.co.uk.

significance,”²⁶ can lead to a belief that something seen during one’s formative years is more likely to be true than what they see/read about it later in life. The brain is biased towards these earlier memories, so in the *Pocahontas* example those who saw the film as a child are more likely to assume there is historical truth to the film.

The next mechanism is splitting, where the viewer tries to disregard a complex reality in favor of a more black and white approach. *Pocahontas* tries to separate the characters into two camps that both see each other as “savages” yet the reality of Native American – European relationships has always been far more complex. Next is projection/displacement, where the viewer begins to attribute their own, “feelings, ideas, or attitudes to some other people or objects.”²⁷ *Pocahontas* as a film attempts to deal with Americans’ unease with modern struggles like race relations and environmentalism by placing them in the context of the past, far away from modern times. Then there is transference, where desire and emotions are transferred to more inappropriate places. This is simply the fantasy version of colonialism, where the, “people being conquered eagerly embrace their conquerors.” The last mechanism acknowledged by Mintz is depersonalization. Depersonalization, “treats events as inevitable, as the product of impersonal forces rather than of human agency.”²⁸ Here, the historical subjects, in this case Pocahontas and her tribe, appear as, “tragic victims of an ongoing process of social change, fated for extinction.”²⁹

²⁶ Steven Mintz, Randy Roberts, and David Welky, *Hollywood's America: Understanding History through Film* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 395-96.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 396.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 397.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 397-98.

These psychological mechanisms are particularly effective on a young mind. While most historians would balk at the thought of Disney's *Pocahontas* being considered "historical" it does not change the fact that it is fiction based on actual people. For an entire generation, *Pocahontas* might be the first engagement young people have with that era of history, along with other children's stories that manipulate or hide away history like the first Thanksgiving, Squanto, and more. To grow up thinking one thing before getting to secondary or post-secondary education only to be told that history is wrong can lead anyone into the psychological traps that Mintz outlines.

If it is the case that average moviegoers, like Wallace, do not expect the films they consume to be perfectly accurate, then what is the point? Why then should anyone bother to compare a fictionalized film to the work of a prestigious scholar? Writing for *The Guardian*, Alex von Tunzelmann claims that, "good historical movies can inspire people to find out more about the period being portrayed," so long as they have the **tools** to engage with it in that way. "[C]omparing the difference between the historical fact and the movie fiction enables the viewer to analyze not only what the filmmaker perceives about the period, but what the filmmaker is using this historical reality to say."³⁰

Historical film has the potential to shape public perception of history. "Fact-based or fictional, realistic or fantastic, history movies shape the way people think about the past."³¹ Sometimes the changes to history included are harmful to the overall discussion such as with *JFK*, *The Patriot*, and *Pocahontas* and other times they are not like with *Amistad*. Peter Rollins, for the book *Lights Camera Action*, sums this up nicely:

³⁰ Alex von Tunzelmann, "Rewriting the Past: Do Historical Movies Have to Be Accurate?," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 1, 2019), www.theguardian.com.

³¹ Scott Alan Metzger, "Are Movies a Good Way to Learn History?," *The Conversation*, May 16, 2017, theconversation.com.

In our media age, it is essential for citizens to be aware of the power of motion pictures and television to determine our media environment. The sheer duration of viewing each day by the ordinary American— as much as six hours— cannot be dismissed as ‘mere entertainment’ because the popular arts entertain only when they touch audience anxieties and aspirations. In the process, they shape popular culture and, over time, popular perceptions.³²

There is sufficient evidence to prove that if started in the classroom, analyzing a film’s historical accuracy can become a standard way to teach the average person how to engage with history in a successful way without ruining their moviegoing experience. Next, we will explore different approaches to engaging with historical accuracy in the classroom so we can move towards creating a basic criterion that educators can use with their students to properly engage with Historical Film.

1.2 Historical Accuracy in the Classroom

Analyzing historical film is not something that most people feel drawn to. No one wants to go to the movies and come home to write an essay on what all the film got wrong. However, it is possible to teach students how to engage with historical film and what to keep an eye out for when they go see the next big blockbuster. Even if someone can watch a historical film and come out of it knowing how to look for its inaccuracies and also be aware of whether those inaccuracies are potentially harmful is an amazing step in the right direction. “No one expects film to be a schoolbook,” writes Mintz, and he is partially correct. Every historical film will have historical inaccuracies, that is to be expected. How people learn from historical film and its inaccuracy begins in the classroom. However, Eleftheria Thanouli contends that every historical film is a “magnified miniature” of a history book. They may be condensed and distorted, but

³² Francaviglia et. al., *Lights, Camera, History*, 8-9.

somewhere within there is historical evidence that has either been engaged with or tossed aside.³³ This is all inclusive of all ranges of historical film, from docudrama, to documentary, to straight historical fiction. In fact, “historians are often more discomfited by ‘realistic’ films,” because the more realistic the movie looks, the more likely it is that an audience will take what they see at face value.³⁴

Scott Metzger, an associate professor at Penn State University, writes that, “History movies have potential as learning tools,” yet by themselves they do not teach history. Historical films must be approached by educators and their students together, and the educators must bring to the table a decent breadth of knowledge about the subject in question, as well as properly outline the goals expected in the exercise.³⁵ Alex von Tunzelmann concurs, saying that, “It starts with schools: it is vital that the humanities, including history, aren’t neglected, for they teach the process of critical thinking.”³⁶

Debra Donnelly revealed a study featuring a group of teachers polled from across densely populated areas of New South Wales, Australia. The study asked whether they believed feature film to be a powerful teaching tool and to give a reason for their answer. Of those who participated, 83% said yes and 15% said no. Within that 15%, the majority of participants who said no gave that answer because they did not find films to be historically accurate enough, representing 10% of total participants in the study.³⁷ Ten

³³ Eleftheria Thanouli, *History and Film: a Tale of Two Disciplines* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019), 229-30.

³⁴ Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry, eds., *Film, History and Memory* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

³⁵ Metzger, “Are Movies,” The Conversation.

³⁶ Tunzelmann, “Rewriting the Past,” The Guardian.

³⁷ Donnelly, “Using Feature Film,” 19.

percent of a group is a significant amount. If 100 out of 1000 teachers/professors feel uncomfortable using film as a tool to teach history, that is a problem.

Foner balks at the use of a study guide distributed amongst history teachers to help them use *Amistad* as a tool to teach about slavery. “The guide erases the distinction between fact and fiction, urging students, for example, to study black abolitionism through the film’s invented character . . . rather than real historical figures. And it fallaciously proclaims the case a ‘turning-point in the struggle to end slavery in the United States.’”³⁸ Though film is useful as a tool for teaching history, if the history is presented in such a way that minimizes the importance of the historical event then that tool becomes unreliable. “The effective utilization of film in the teaching of history . . . requires clear learning objectives and explicit teaching,” writes Donnelly. “[W]ithout careful time allocation and explicit teaching, film can become another “distraction” to the examination and analysis of historical sources.”³⁹

A film does not need to be historically accurate to be considered a good film. In fact, as a business, film does not need to be historically accurate at all. “The bottom line of the film business is not accuracy but profit,” writes Paul Weinstein. The primary goal of filmmaking is to make money through entertainment; therefore, the film simply must be enjoyable enough to be profitable for the studio making the film. However, “these shortcomings . . . can actually be turned to advantages when students and instructors utilize film as a gateway to history.”⁴⁰ This does not, however, eliminate the importance of critiquing a film based on its historical accuracy.

³⁸ Foner, “Amistad Case.”

³⁹ Donnelly, “Using Feature Film,” 18.

⁴⁰ Weinstein, “Movies as Gateway,” 28.

In a way, this is what *Amistad* does. Though it makes changes to the history and presents it in a different light than the historic case itself, the film is still useful as a way to get students talking about themes and beliefs of the time period it is set in. Foner's criticism still stands as a truth, especially for those outside of a history classroom who watch the film. We can make a strong argument that a history student should be expected to critically analyze a film for its historical inaccuracies, but a random person walking into a movie theater is not likely going to go home and look up the Amistad case. They will take the film's claims that it is based on a true story and that it was a "turning point" in the discussion of slavery in the United States at face value, never checking to verify the truth. In many ways, *Amistad* pulls heavily from the "white savior" and/or "great white hope" tropes that get used a lot in cinema even to this day. These tropes are often harmful to the discussion of history as they can eliminate the agency of the other people portrayed. While *Amistad* is not overtly harmful in its historical misinformation, the continued use of those tropes and other historical inaccuracies are.

In an extensive article for *Edutopia*, a website sponsored by the *George Lucas Educational Foundation*, Benjamin Barbour outlines the best uses of film as a teaching tool from his perspective as a secondary school educator. Rather than ignoring the idealized past presented by Hollywood, it is more prudent to use films that are known to be historically inaccurate to help students understand what patterns they should be looking for in all historical film. Barbour recommends that educators first provide their students with sufficient background information on a topic before showing a film. It should stand to reason that a historical film, even a documentary, should not be a student's first engagement with that history in the classroom. Instead film should be used

as a supplementary teaching tool to help teach critical thinking. If this initial approach is taken, then students should have a much easier time identifying the kinds of information Hollywood is most likely to leave out.⁴¹

Barbour and Weinstein agree on the next step; evaluating why the filmmakers chose to change or abandon some facet of history. Was it to push an agenda, or merely to save time in the film? Was the film's presentation (e.g., stylistic choices or even editing) also a part of this?⁴² "Films do not represent reality, but an interpretation of reality," writes Jennie Carlson and Fearghal McGarry, "and they very often reflect a hidden or not-so-hidden propagandistic dimension."⁴³ How does this interpretation of reality hold up to scrutiny from a historiographical perspective? These are the kinds of questions to ask directly after a film while still fresh in the minds of students. Next, Barbour recommends educators provide students with or else help them find articles and reviews of the film in question. There should be a balance here between film reviews and reviews by historians. This will help students begin to understand the difference between what Hollywood and historians believe to be important in a historical film.⁴⁴

Comparing quotes or actions from historical figures in the movies to what their real-life counterparts did is also a useful strategy here. By using primary sources in an "investigatory" manner not only are students learning how best to interact with a secondary source like film, but also how to read and interpret their primary sources in a competent way. Avoid letting them get lost in the minutia. It might be tempting to go off

⁴¹ Benjamin Barbour, "Using Inaccurate Films to Understand History," Edutopia (George Lucas Educational Foundation, May 10, 2019), www.edutopia.org.

⁴² Barbour, "Using Inaccurate Films," Edutopia; Weinstein, "Movies as a Gateway," 43-4.

⁴³ Carlsten and McGarry, *Film, History and Memory*, 10.

⁴⁴ Barbour, "Using Inaccurate Films," Edutopia.

on a tangent about how the film does not use period accurate war medals, etc. etc.

Overall, this is not beneficial to the discussion and falls directly into Carnes' worry that educators will alienate their students, or perhaps the students will alienate themselves.

The small things are worth keeping in mind though they are as large of an issue as more explicit, and harmful historical inaccuracies.⁴⁵

How an educator has their students interact with their findings is entirely up to the educator. Writing their own critical review seems an obvious choice, though other strategies might encourage more class involvement. Perhaps having students rewrite a particularly egregious scene so that it retains its impact in the film while staying more true to the actual narrative, or else asking them to take on the role of a historical expert and recommend changes to a scene as if they were simply watching a rough cut.

Whatever the educator chooses, they first need criteria to base their engagement on. A way for the students and teacher to work together to analyze and evaluate without simply taking the word of other historians. Section 2 of this paper shows example criteria that will then be used to evaluate some more recent historical films.

Conclusions

If we accept that historical film does play a role in how the average person understands history, then we also must accept that the best way to ensure that those same people engage and understand history in a helpful way is to start in the classroom. By using film as a teaching tool, we open the means of training even those who do not seek out history as a career to better understand what is shown to them in pop culture.

Developing critical thinking skills and learning to understand how and why historical

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

films choose to omit, exaggerate or deemphasize certain points of history can help anyone casually understand what parts of a film they should not take at the word of the filmmakers.

To successfully engage students with historical film, educators must work with them to evaluate the films usefulness as a supplementary tool to that vein of history without also “ruining” the film. Accepting that a film can be decent regardless of its historical inaccuracies can be difficult for some historians but avoiding such a powerful tool due to nitpicking for the smallest problems are not helpful. By creating basic criteria, we can ensure that the classroom environment is able to easily engage with historical film in a positive way.

Part 2: Evaluating Films Based on Historical Accuracy

To create a successful criterion for analyzing films on their historical accuracy, it is important to consider all of what makes a film. Historical accuracy *is* important when teaching about film, however just as important is how enjoyable the film is. If a film is very historically accurate but not engaging, then the film will fall flat. How can you even begin the conversation of analyzing a film if it was not in some way able to grasp the attention of the audience, in this case a classroom full of students? Historians can take inspiration from film critics on how a film invokes its art to immerse the audience, while still retaining their own standards for historical accuracy. This applies not only to films “based on a true story” but also to fictional films that use historical events as their setting or to frame the narrative.

2.1 Common Film Standards

Certain standards are important in the evaluation of any film: production design, casting, characterization, costuming, writing, the score, acting, sound design, editing, and more. If a film is lacking in any one of these areas, let alone multiple, then it is already at a disadvantage in the eyes of film critics. Several of these standard critiques cross over with historian critiques as well, namely production design and costuming. To fully immerse the audience within a historical film, it must look the part. Often, these are the areas that filmmakers focus much of their attention on.

Students should be asked to analyze details involving the setting and design of the film. Are the locations, costumes, and sets accurate? Does the overall production design accurately reflect the period the film is trying to present? Has the filmmaker included any extra details just to help the audience suspend their disbelief? Often this is the section that filmmakers determinedly focus on in terms of making an “accurate” film. If the costumes, props, and setting are all correct, then the film is doing its job of immersing the viewer in that time. Even in fictional films, if they are set during a specific era then the filmmakers want to make every effort to successfully immerse their audience. It is not always perfect, particularly regarding props. Occasionally a film comes out that features weapons that are not accurate to the time but are instead slightly more modern to improve the action moments of the film. But overall if a film looks right, then it is more likely to feel right to the audience.

Looking back to Foner and Sayles, this very notion is acknowledged. When asked what sort of things he did to recreate the period of one of his films *Eight Men Out* (1988), Sayles informs Foner that he did a lot of research into the Baseball World Series

portrayed in the film. “You do things that you think are going to strike people,” he says, “if somebody hit a ground ball to the shortstop in the third inning of the fourth game, that was the way it was shown on the screen.”⁴⁶ According to Sayles one of the biggest roadblocks to a historical film, at least for a filmmaker, has to do with casting. If too much of the budget is allocated towards high profile actors then the rest of the production may suffer, sacrificing the story and perhaps the characterization of its subjects to draw more people into seats with bigger name actors.

William Manchester in his evaluation of *Young Winston* (1972) for *Past Imperfect* laments the characterization for the young Winston Churchill because despite many of the facts being mostly accurate within the film the actor Simon Ward did not bring historical weight to the life of said man. Though the film, “avoids being reverential or servile,” it is also, “devoid of genuine conflict . . . occasionally hitting us over the head with thudding reminders of the towering figure our hero will someday become.”⁴⁷

With characterization and the portrayal of figures during historical times students should then ask some more questions. How do different genders interact with one another? Do characters speech and actions accurately reflect their class and period? Within this section is the important question of whether the film engages in “presentism” which is defined by Paul Weinstein as when, “characters act and speak in the manner of people at the time the film was made, rather than the time in which the film is set.”⁴⁸ Aside from this presentism also can be when modern attitudes or sensibilities are applied to the past. Presentism can be a major weakness in films that are attempting to be

⁴⁶ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 15.

⁴⁷ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 177.

⁴⁸ Weinstein, “Movies as Gateway,” 43.

believable. However, in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) we see one of the more commonly cited uses of presentism in film. Written by Dalton Trumbo, *Spartacus* was a highly political movie that came out during the rampant McCarthyism of the Cold War. Though inspired by a real slave rebellion, watchers of *Spartacus* are treated more to a political commentary of the time rather than an accurate portrayal of Roman gladiators.⁴⁹

Presentism reflects a, "problem in the presentation of values, attitudes and societal roles of the past, which may jar with modern sensibilities." Debra Donnelly continues,

For example, many contemporary audiences may not be comfortable with the rigid codes of behavior limited expectation of independence that existed for women in some past, and indeed contemporary, societies. However, to modernize, and westernize, these narratives for the comfort of the audience is to falsify the historical record and undervalue the dynamic shifts in sex-based roles in human history.⁵⁰

Production design, casting, and characterization play major roles in drawing audiences into a film. Regardless of whether someone is critically analyzing a film or watching it for fun, those things will likely be noticed, which is why so many filmmakers take care to focus on these aspects of the film even if they let some of the facts suffer. When analyzing a film for its historical accuracy, these standard criteria common to all films should be accounted for in the student's analyzation. Though they do not necessarily make or break a film in terms of hard facts, they affect how the film grasps its audience, and therefore cannot be left out of any evaluation.

⁴⁹ Carnes, *Past Imperfect*, 40.

⁵⁰ Donnelly, "Using Feature Film," 17-8.

2.2 Accepting Harmless Liberties

As we saw with *Amistad*, there are certain liberties that filmmakers can take that are harmless overall to the film's presentation of history. Time compression, small inaccuracies, and harmless omissions or additions to the plot fall into this category. Though sometimes this may include something glaring to a historian, such as an incorrect firearm for the time or an otherwise incorrect prop, this does not majorly inconvenience the film as a whole

In *Saving Private Ryan* we are treated to approximately twenty minutes of footage detailing fictional characters landing at Normandy in a very realistic interpretation of the chaos and bloodshed of that day. However, to get to the story of the film after this section we skip ahead a few days after D-Day. This is an understandable compression of time as the events of D-Day and the days that followed could take up an entire film in and of themselves. In *Amistad*, though the importance of the trial could be considered factually incorrect, the compression of time in the final court scene between Adams and the Supreme Court helps to bring the film to a satisfying conclusion. Many historical films will condense the timeline of events to keep the film from becoming stagnant. The majority of *Amistad* is everything leading up to the trial in front of the Supreme Court, so by the end it would be strange to show another thirty minutes of multiple days of a courtroom after having spent a significant chunk of the movie showing the case progress through the lower courts. From a filmmaking perspective, it is more useful to condense John Quincy Adams' argument to a single speech and allow Sir Anthony Hopkins to carry the film to its close.

Inconsequential inaccuracies also should hold little sway in the evaluation of a historical film. Small items that get changed or added just to embellish the scene a bit. For example, though the real *La Amistad* schooner came into port in August when there was no snow present, it does not harm the history to have snow falling as the ship is brought in by the U.S. Navy. *Amistad* also features a photograph of President Martin Van Buren, even though he would not be photographed until about six years later as photography was not yet widespread.

These small changes or oversights do not alter or harm the history presented in the film. They are interesting to note and often can be found in trivia sections of websites like IMDB (The Internet Movie Database) but overall are inconsequential to the main point of the film or especially to its impact.

2.3 When Inaccuracies Become Harmful

As inaccuracies, omissions/additions, exaggerations, and other falsehoods grow in scope they can easily begin to overtake the historical fact to the point that it actively harms the discussion of that history. Whether this is changing the importance of certain characters in the film from their real-life counterparts or actively inserting false or unverified information into the film to increase the drama, all of it damages how the viewers interpret the history. Professors who use film as a teaching tool particularly need to address these kinds of falsehoods with their students.

If an educator were to show their class a film like *JFK* and did not mention the inclusion of fake documentary-style footage, then regardless of any

attempts to engage with the larger historical issues of the time the students are being fed misinformation by a film that presents pure fiction and speculation as fact. Even in a purely fictional film such as *The Patriot* (2000) where many of the characters are based on or inspired by real people, can affect how we talk about the Revolutionary War. Having a British officer ignore the rules of engagement, burn civilians alive inside of a church, and shooting a child paints an ugly picture of the American Revolution that was simply not true. These kinds of pure falsehoods can color how viewers interpret the history of that time, whether the story presented is fictional or not. While *The Patriot* might be a useful film to help students understand certain elements of the American Revolution, educators must ensure that they engage with the students about the falsehoods presented, lest their students walk out of class believing that British Army officers would casually commit war crimes.

Another harmful way that some films can bend the truth is by engaging in the earlier mentioned white savior tropes, wherein a white character rescues or joins up with non-white characters and leads them through dangerous circumstances. Many films engage in this, including *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Lincoln* (2012), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and many others. The danger here is when the trope removes the agency of the non-white characters in favor of showing the white savior in a more pronounced role. *Lincoln*, for example, though based on Doris Kearns Goodwin's popular multi-subject biography of Abraham Lincoln and several of his cabinet members, makes little mention of the role that slaves played in their own emancipation. Instead the film treats slaves as

very passive, simply waiting for the war to end to determine their freedom. Of course, for many there was a lot of waiting around, but this is an example of what some may consider to be harmful to the overall historicity of the film. *The Last Samurai*, though primarily fictional, has some basis in history in that the Japanese did bring foreign military advisors to aid their military strategy, most of them were French and none were Americans. Along with that, the Japanese are treated as very backwards in terms of warfare, with the white hero teaching them how to use firearms, despite Japanese soldiers already being quite adept at doing so.

Agency is particularly important in the discussion of ethnicities outside of Western Europeans and their descendants. When an ethnic “minority” group is portrayed on screen, students should keep an eye out to see if those characters are actively using their own power to help themselves, not simply relying on a lone figure to save them. If that is not the case then perhaps the filmmakers have once again contributed to ignoring or removing the agency of people and individuals who had their own thoughts, feelings, and lives.

Harmful or negative changes to the history presented in a film are not only limited to live-action and can appear in animation just as easily. Films like *Balto* (1995) and *Pocahontas* (1995), though fictionalized stories, are still based on historical events. While these events are embellished and presented in a way that is appropriate for children, the historical background of their stories are lost in the addition of talking animals, sing-along songs, and frankly idiotic characters who take away from the potential story to be told.

2.4 Assessing a Films Agenda

Some filmmakers add or omit certain details to fit a specific agenda they have in their presentation. This agenda can be political as we saw with *Spartacus* earlier. Most important in this step is inferring the message intended by the director and if the film succeeds in doing so. Returning to the *Amistad* example, it is clear that Spielberg meant well with his interpretation of the film, yet the true importance of the Amistad case is lost in favor of the aforementioned focus on making it out as a turning point on the conversation of slavery. Though perhaps an average movie goer would see the completed film and feel as if they have learned something significant, there is an entire aspect they will miss out on. To the modern American perhaps it is more significant to talk about bringing an end to slavery, but at the time of the actual event there was a lot of importance levied to the case *because* it was an indictment against the **importation** of slaves.

Students should ask themselves why a film is presented in the way it is, as well as who stands to gain from that presentation. An easy to reference film in this regard would be *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film notorious for its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan as well as the resurgence of that same organization around the time of the film's release. Though the film chronicles some history, it also features a fictional plot that revolves around two families and portrays African Americans as raving beasts during the time of Reconstruction. Not a pleasant film for the modern-day viewer who should have more sensibility, but ideas like what is shown in *Birth of a Nation* are prevalent to this day, and though this old racist film is not exactly shown in classrooms around the country on any kind of a regular basis, less than 100 years ago it was screened in the White House for

President Woodrow Wilson. Films like *JFK* and *Birth of a Nation* have clearly defined agendas due to the outrageous claims behind them. Not every film will have an agenda that is easy to clarify, but through analyzing the film one should be able to get at least a basic understanding of it.

2.5 The Criteria

After this brief discussion of the kinds of things students and educators should dialog about regarding films that intend to portray history, we have a solid base for an analytical criterion that can be used in the classroom. Educators cannot simply gloss over the historical inaccuracies present in the films they choose to show to their students, and instead must actively engage in a discussion with their students about those inaccuracies. Helping students understand that film, while a wonderful visual aid, has inherent flaws that can affect popular perception of history is important. The criteria below should aid in classroom discussion of history and allow students to engage with film as a potential source for expanding their historical knowledge.

- 1.) First, **evaluate the film on its overall design**. Did it draw you in as a viewer? Were the actors believable in their roles? Did the props, costumes, and sets seem to fit the story and the period? How did the filmmakers surprise you with the film? Did the score positively or negatively affect your immersion? Most importantly, did you enjoy it?
- 2.) Second, **don't sweat the small stuff**. Do not fret over time compression or other small errors. This is what might turn people off

from engaging with film as a teaching tool. Identify small inaccuracies or changes, and then ask a few simple questions. Did they detract from the film or the story? Did they enhance it? How noticeable were they? Are they important to the discussion of the history portrayed in the film?

- 3.) Third, **identify major inaccuracies.** If something seems too good to be true, it just might be. Film has a way of exaggerating and embellishing fiction to romanticize a story, while also omitting important facts or adding unnecessary characters, plot lines, or events. Are these changes to the history harmful to the overall discussion of the subject in question? Does the film add something and portray it as fact? Does the film omit something important to the discussion of that event? If the inaccuracy is noticeable but not necessarily harmful to the overall discussion, question why it was included (or not included) within the film.
- 4.) Fourth, **try to identify bias or agenda in the film.** Are the filmmakers trying to advance a certain belief with how the film is presented? If so, does this agenda help or harm the history they are trying to show you? Does the identified agenda look as if it is making a point about the story within the film, or are the filmmakers trying to draw parallels between a historical event and the modern-day?
- 5.) Finally, **evaluate the film as a teaching/learning tool.** Do the historical inaccuracies take away from the film to the point where it is

not viable as a learning tool for your class? Does the film's major changes to the actual history take away from the overall discussion of that portion of history. Even if the film has some major inaccuracies in it, is it still worth watching to keep the conversation about its topic alive?

By following these guidelines, professors and students should be able to engage together and evaluate historical films. Do not nitpick at the insignificant but analyze and critically think about the film presented to you. Act to approach the film as a historian and a film critic. Though you might be in a history class, do not forget that films are also there to entertain you. How much you enjoyed the experience of watching the film is just as important as what is true and what is false when it comes to the overall evaluation of the film. Do not let the small (or even some of the large) inaccuracies ruin the film for you. Simply mark them and continue watching. Educators should encourage students to ask these questions and engage with them in a discussion. Work together to separate fact from fiction and from there continue your discussion of the larger picture.

The final section of this paper will apply these criteria to a few more recent films as "case studies" to prove concept and evaluate said films use in the classroom. They are meant to be examples of something a student could easily do after watching a film in the classroom using easy to access sources available online. Published reviews by film critics and historians on online magazines and sources that actively identify the inaccuracies present in films are simple to find and do not require students to compare a film directly to a historical text.

Part 3: Case Studies

The following three film reviews are examples of the kind of thing that can be done with the criteria given in Part 2. Using some more recently release films the idea here is to show how easy it can be for students to engage with historical film. Assuredly they will have textbooks as a source they can use to verify fact from fiction, yet there are also a variety of online sources to easily pull from as well. Using these kinds of online sources, the case studies below cover multiple types of historical film, including historical drama, historical fiction, and biopic. They will identify inaccuracies as well as whether those inaccuracies are harmful to the discussion of the history presented within the film. Each study features its own works cited at the end of the film review.

3.1 : It's All About Perspective:

Dunkirk, Darkest Hour, and How History Can Thrive Through Fact and Fiction

When two films are released in the same year with overlapping subject matter, it becomes very easy to compare them to one another. In 2017, audiences were treated to Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* and Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*, both of which take place during the initial stages of World War II from drastically different perspectives. *Dunkirk* is a historical fiction that invents characters to help show off the very real historical event of the Dunkirk evacuations, where nearly 400,000 British troops were left standing on a beach in France awaiting a way back to England. *Darkest Hour* is a biopic of Winston Churchill during his ascension to the seat of Prime Minister and his struggles in that office while trying to deal with rising war. Both films culminate with Churchill's famous "We shall fight on the beaches," speech, though *Dunkirk* shows it from the point of view of soldiers and citizens, while in *Darkest Hour* we get to see Churchill deliver it to

Parliament. Despite one being historical fiction and the other being a biopic, both films portray the history of the time rather well, though not perfectly.

Overall, the design of both films is impeccable. Both were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture along with a few other awards at that same ceremony. Where *Dunkirk* does a lot more with visuals than dialogue, *Darkest Hour* is nearly the opposite, focusing on the experiences of one man and the people around him. Both films also feature phenomenal casts, Nolan of course pulls from a shortlist of some of his favorite collaborators including Tom Hardy and Cillian Murphy, while also adding Kenneth Branagh, Mark Rylance, Fionn Whitehead, and Harry Styles. Meanwhile for *Darkest Hour* Joe Wright brings in the phenomenal Gary Oldman as Churchill, who played the role so well it earned him the Academy Award for Best Actor that year. Oldman is joined by Kristin Scott Thomas, Lily James, and several others.

There are certain small inaccuracies that are present within the films, for example how the German planes were painted in *Dunkirk* was not common until later in the war, or in *Darkest Hour* where people were able to listen to Churchill's speech live over the radio as he delivered it. While the latter makes for an excellent dramatic film moment, radio broadcasts from Parliament were not available until at least 1970. These kinds of inaccuracies do not affect the overall impact of the film, nor are they exactly noticeable upon first viewing. Such minute details as the pamphlets dropped on the British soldiers in *Dunkirk* being in color even though they were not in real life are of little consequence.

In terms of more major or noticeable historical inaccuracies, it is odd in this case that the historical fiction of *Dunkirk* paints a more accurate picture of its subject matter than the biopic of *Darkest Hour*. Nolan admits in an interview with Fandango that the

thing he is proudest of with *Dunkirk* is that through his “present-tense narrative” he was able to allow audiences to, “just try to live in the moment and experience it with them [the characters].” Furthermore, History vs. Hollywood references another Nolan interview in which he said, “By using fiction, I was able to explain various aspects of what happened in Dunkirk more efficiently and with more emotional clarity than by just following strict facts.” Indeed, by utilizing first-hand accounts from soldiers and civilians who were a part of the Dunkirk evacuations, Nolan was able to easily create the mood and spirit of that event while carefully avoiding the specifics of a known person.

Meanwhile, when catering a story around real people and their experiences we are much more likely to scrutinize *Darkest Hour* as we expect more historical fact from it. There are many major inaccuracies with *Darkest Hour* though perhaps little in the way of harmful inaccuracies. For example, Lily James portrays Churchill’s secretary Elizabeth Layton in the film as a major character who is there with Churchill through many defining moments. However, this is all fictionalized. Not Layton’s relationship with Churchill as that is portrayed rather accurately, but the timeline. Layton did not come to work for Churchill until at least a year after the events portrayed in the film. The film also invents the death of Layton’s brother fighting in France.

There is little in the way of harmful inaccuracy in *Darkest Hour*, most of the relationships he has with the people around him are shown faithfully though perhaps exaggerated at specific moments to increase the drama of the film. One thing that is worthy of note, however, is Churchill’s views on Nazism and Democracy. The film presents Churchill as a firm opponent to Nazism which was very true. He actively spoke out against Nazism at every available moment. Though the film might have you believe

he was a firm believer in democracy as opposed to authoritarianism, he was a fervent supporter and defender of the British Empire and wished to preserve it in perpetuity. In fact, according to historian John Broich for Slate Magazine, something the film does leave out is Churchill's rage at Indian politicians, many of whom recommended that their citizens refuse to participate in the war. Though the soldiers of the Indian Army did as they were told and fought in the war on the side of the British Empire, it is still a deliberate omission of a more problematic part of Churchill's views. Indeed, even *Dunkirk* is guilty of failing to show how many Indian and North African soldiers were at Dunkirk beach during the evacuation.

While *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* both show different kinds of history, they were also made with clearly different intentions. We have already discussed Nolan's belief that he simply wanted his audiences to be able to "experience" the events portrayed in the film along with their characters. This seems to have done the trick as after the premiere, Kenneth Branagh did an interview with Steven Colbert where he said that about thirty Dunkirk veterans attended the premiere and nearly all of them described it as true to life but, "louder than the [real] battle." *Darkest Hour* on the other hand clearly shows some parallels towards the modern-day British issue of Brexit. One can argue that Churchill's indecisiveness at various points in the film, which was not true to life for a man of action like him, is a reference to the indecisiveness of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. The film clearly shows the British as needing help from allies yet determined to stand strong and, "if necessary, alone."

If someone wanted to use *Darkest Hour* or *Dunkirk* in the classroom, both would have their uses and drawbacks. *Dunkirk*, though fictionalized, makes an excellent film for

showing what the early stages of World War II were like and tries to slip enough true-to-life experiences onto its manufactured characters to draw audiences in. *Darkest Hour* is a well-presented version of the political side of the war from Britain and has enough truth to it to allow viewers to look over some of the larger inaccuracies. All in all, both films are worth a watch and are engaging to their audiences.

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3.2 – The Enigma of Truth:

The Imitation Game and Misrepresentation for the Sake of Drama

Biopic films, films that dramatize the life of an actual person, often can fall into the same traps that standard written biographies do in that they over glorify their subject. Indeed it can be difficult to spend so much time trying to understand the mind and experiences of a historical person, so much so that the biographer may either begin to see their subject as one that can do no wrong. With film this can translate poorly when the filmmakers choose to downplay or omit certain facets of their subjects lives that are important to who they were as a person rather than share those things with the audience. Filmmakers may also try to add something to the story to increase the drama of their “art,” but in doing so might unintentionally damage the reputation of their subject.

Upon its theatrical release in 2014, *The Imitation Game* gained critical praise for its ensemble cast of Benedict Cumberbatch, Kiera Knightley, Charles Dance, and Mark Strong, and even earned a few Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture. Indeed, the film was lauded as one of the best British films that year. Based on the biography *Alan Turing: The Enigma* written by Andrew Hodges, the film is wonderfully crafted. The story of Alan Turing (played by Cumberbatch), famous British polymath and an instrumental piece behind the breaking of the German Enigma code in World War II is complemented by fantastic set design, actors that seem perfectly cast, and a wonderful score by Alexandre Desplat to tie everything together. Some of the best scenes of the film were filmed near Bletchley Park itself, only adding to the immersion of the film. Certainly, it is an enjoyable film that helped get Turing’s story out to a wider audience.

Upon closer investigation, however, the film seems to make a lot of changes to the history, and to Turing's personal life, all for the sake of drama.

There are certain small inaccuracies withing *The Imitation Game* that do not take away from the story. Turing naming the codebreaking machine "Christopher" is a nice nod to how important his childhood friend Christopher Morcum was to him and how strongly his death continued to affect Turing through his life. Though historically inaccurate, the hiring of Joan Clarke after she solved a complex crossword puzzle used to recruit for Bletchley Park is based on some actual hiring practices done at said facility, though in real life neither Turing or Clarke ever had anything to do with that. As it is a representation of how some people were hired it is a perfectly fine way to introduce a "fun fact" about the time.

From here, however, the inaccuracies become larger, and several of them are damaging to the character of Turing. *The Imitation Game* almost seems to glorify Turing's genius. There is no doubt that the man was brilliant. A fully capable scientist with a knack for logic and code work, his work led to the creation of the very first computers. However, the film often makes Turing out to be the single most important person of the group trying to break the Enigma code. The film makes Turing out to be almost an autistic savant type of personality, some of which is taken from Hodges biography but once again exaggerated. In an article for Slate magazine, L.V. Anderson writes, "[t]o be sure, Hodges paints Turing as shy, eccentric, and impatient with irrationality, but Cumberbatch's narcissistic, detached Alan has more in common with the actor's title character in *Sherlock* than with the Turing of Hodges' biography."

The filmmakers seem to insinuate that Turing designed the code-breaking machine himself, while forgetting to even mention the refinement done by mathematician Gordon Welchman. The film also tends to inject drama where there need not be any. Charles Dance's character, Commander Denniston, is used as a foil to Turing and his team, even attempting to fire Turing when results were not immediate. Though this does symbolically link to the struggle between military brass and the cryptologists, Denniston's family have declared his portrayal as very inaccurate. In fact, Denniston was the one who recruited and later hired Turing to Bletchley Park.

Some of the worst inaccuracies present in the film are related to Turing's characterization. Most notably, the suggestion that Turing covered for the Soviet spy John Cairncross under threat of blackmail. In the film, after having admitted his homosexual tendencies to Cairncross, Turing discovers evidence linking Cairncross to Soviet interests. Cairncross then blackmails Turing, threatening to reveal his homosexuality (illegal in England at the time), and Turing does cover up for him for a time. This is a ludicrous falsehood that has no business in a film that purports to show the real life of an important individual. It is as if the filmmakers did not have enough drama for the plot of the film and decided to just throw something together. Cairncross and Turing worked in separate divisions at Bletchley Park and therefore likely never met due to the massive amounts of security surrounding the intelligence operations that went on there. In an article for *The Guardian*, Alex von Tunzelmann put it best when he wrote, "[c]reative license is one thing, but slandering a great man's reputation – while buying into the nasty 1950s prejudice that gay men automatically constituted a security risk – is quite another."

This falsehood feeds into another, where Turing is arrested for his homosexuality after being investigated for possibly also being a Soviet spy. The invented character, Detective Robert Nock investigates Turing under suspicion of espionage, because the filmmakers wanted to show how what happened to Turing could have happened because of anyone. Nock is not a bad person; he is just a detective doing his job. However, by feeding audiences this false information the filmmakers do a disservice to Turing's story. Turing's arrest came after he reported a petty theft and changed certain details of the story to cover up the relationship he was having with the suspect. British police quickly homed in on these discrepancies and accused Turing of gross indecency, which he admitted to.

Why invent these unnecessary espionage storylines that damage the character of a truly brilliant man? There was plenty of real history to go on for Turing's story, but inventing plots that essentially accuse him of treason at multiple points in his life seems to have been deemed better for the dramatic license of the film. Yes there was a so called "purple scare" in the 1950s, a fear that homosexuals were more likely to sympathize with communists, and that was something that Turing had to deal with the rest of his life after his conviction and punishment. But when the film tries to connect him to this stereotype is where it goes too far.

The Imitation Game is certainly a well-made film. It is spurred on by an excellent cast and an intriguing story. However, it is not a great biography of Turing himself. Too much of Turing's personality and personal life is falsified or exaggerated. For entertainment value or movie night, a fantastic watch, but for use in the classroom

teaching about Turing or that facet of World War II, it might be easier to stick to documentaries and written biographies.

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3.3 - In Full Rebellion:

Free State of Jones and the Impact of Censored/Unknown History

While some history is altered when put into film, film can also be a useful tool towards helping a wider audience understand something that many would rather forget. If the people of a region want to modify a story through their own oral histories, then that can make it very difficult for historians to identify truth from falsehood. When that becomes the **only** prevalent source of information, then there becomes a problem. This next film, *Free State of Jones* (2016), exemplifies a story that while still flawed is a pushback against censorship of history.

Free State of Jones tells the story of Newton Knight and his followers in Jones County, Mississippi, who successfully resisted Confederate tax collectors and troops in the region by symbolically seceding from the Confederacy and taking up arms against them. Matthew McConaughey plays Knight and plays him extremely well at that. Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Mahershala Ali, and Keri Russell make up the rest of the “principal” cast though there are plenty of other interesting characters with excellent actors behind them in this story. Everything in *Free State of Jones* looks and feels correct. Props, costumes, and actors all come together to make one truly believe they are watching a group of Anti-Confederates fight a guerilla war out of the Mississippi swamps. This film is based on the books *The Free State of Jones* by Victoria E. Bynum and *The State of Jones* by Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer.

Before watching the first trailer for this film this author had never heard of this story. An entire county seceding from the Confederacy and taking up an armed resistance against them. Upon going to see the film, I was overjoyed at the idea of this story being

presented and gave a lot of credit to the director and producers for making the film.

Though many were left wondering why so few people had heard the story of Newton Knight, his mixed-race family, and his rebellion. In an article for *Time Magazine*, Lily Rothman asked Mississippi historian and Newton Knight descendant Jim Kelly, why the story seemed to have vanished from history. Kelly puts it simply that the story was intentionally erased after the end of the failed Reconstruction period. Kelly said he first assumed that the revised story was falsified because, "so many different writers all said the same story, almost verbatim, to the point where it was a red flag." If a lot of sources are telling you the same thing, to the point where it sounds rehearsed, then it is probably wise to suspect a cover-up of the truth, and that's exactly what Kelly found. The Southern Democrats were resentful towards knight and his followers, so they did their best to erase him from history.

In an article for Smithsonian Magazine, Richard Grant went to Jones County to get some information from the locals on Knight and his story. Grant came to find out that reactions to the then upcoming movie were mixed. Grant quotes J.R. Gavin, a local author as saying that, "A lot of people find it easier to forgive Newt for fighting Confederates than mixing blood." Many of the older residents of Jones County find themselves caught up in the belief that Knight was, "a thief, murderer, adulterer and a deserter."

Back to the film, it manages to tell the story of Newton Knight relatively faithfully, while at the same time being quite a good watch. One of the best quotes in the film, delivered excellently by McConaughey's Knight, rings true with sentiments that impact us even in the present:

It ain't just for us, all right? It is for everybody. Black, white, rich, poor. It's for our oppressors who don't even know what's good for 'em yet. It's for everybody who came before us who couldn't even read this ballot. It's for our children, who, Lord willing, won't have to shed blood for it like we have. And it's for their children, and their children's children.

While we have no proof that Knight ever said this exactly, we do have evidence that his friend Jasper Collins, played by Christopher Berry in film, proclaimed the Civil War as, “a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight,” in reaction to the passage of the Twenty Negro Law.

The first two acts of the film take viewers on Newton Knight’s journey through his desertion and rebellion. Being forced to flee for his life after helping some local women learn to protect their farms and goods to survive the war. Knight meets up with runaway slaves in the swamps and begins to work together with them, eventually gaining the support of other Confederate deserters. Runaway slaves and former Confederates fight to keep the Confederacy occupied and to protect the small farms of Jones County, eventually driving out most Confederate occupancy and declaring their home the Free State of Jones.

The third act of the film takes place after the end of the war and shows us Newt’s struggle with locals after the passage of Jim Crow laws at the end of the Reconstruction period. In these scenes, men who he had fought with alongside runaway slaves were unwilling to allow the now free African Americans the right to vote, as well as his eventual entry into a common law marriage with Rachel. An interesting point was that

Knight remained married to his original wife, and they all lived together and formed a mixed-race community who due to prejudice were often forced to intermarry within the community for years. His descendants, however, have no problem with this and are proud of their ancestors and their story. In fact, the story is bookended with the tale of Davis Knight, Newt's great-grandson who, despite looking white, was put on trial for miscegenation (that is, interracial marriage). Davis was convicted in the Mississippi lower courts, but eventually cleared by the state Supreme Court.

Most major inaccuracies with this film revolve around the inclusion of characters who likely did not exist. Newt's nephew Daniel, who is killed in the Battle of Corinth at the beginning of the film, serves as a major impetus for Newt's desertion. However, the character Daniel is more than likely a composite of many young men who died fighting a rich man's war. A few other characters in the film are also composite characters like this, including the minor antagonist Lieutenant Barbour who Newt helps local women drive off by teaching them to shoot, and Moses Washington, Newt's friend and a runaway slave. Composite characters such as this are not overtly harmful to history if they are not covering up specific people or their deeds. Knight and his company encountered several Confederate officers, and for the film the most important one was Major Amos McLemore; therefore, the filmmakers could afford to compile a few people into one character like Barbour. As for Moses Washington, he is likely meant to be a composite for many runaway slaves who helped fight the confederacy, many of whom to this day are not named.

Some scenes of this film scream out for further scrutiny, such as the church ambush as well as Newt's personal killing of Amos McLemore. History vs. Hollywood

identifies both moments to be at least partially true, with sufficient evidence to back them up. Victoria Bynum, author of one of the books the film is based on, confirms that in oral histories passed down by Newt's descendants, the ambush at the church did happen, and Knight is rumored to have personally killed Major McLemore, though the events of that killing are different than portrayed in the film.

Overall, the biggest downside to this film is its length. Though it is only two and a half hours long, the third act feels as if it is building to a conclusion on at least three different occasions. The inclusion of the extra history and completing Newton Knight's story was of course welcome, but the way the film presents them near the end begins to drag on a bit. There are echoes of the "white-savior" trope that many people dread, however in a review for the New York Times A.O. Scott puts it a better way. "[T]his is not yet another film about a white savior sacrificing himself on behalf of the darker-skinned oppressed. Nor for that matter is it the story of a white sinner redeemed by the superhuman selflessness of black people." Instead, Scott describes *Free State of Jones* as, "a film that tries to strike sparks of political insight from a well-worn genre template."

Free State of Jones is absolutely a worthwhile film to use in the classroom to help show students a rarely taught history of the Civil War. It is engaging to watch, if a bit long, and tells its story well with few major inaccuracies and none that are overtly harmful. If anything, this film, and the story it presents, are proof that there is history out there that some people would rather stay in the past and not be talked about. If film is used in this freeing way, it is a boon to historians both in and out of the classroom.

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Conclusory Remarks

The goals of this project were as follows: First, show how historical film can affect public understanding of history and therefore why it is important to be able to identify historical inaccuracy in film. Next connect this to the classroom, the place where critical thinking skills are learned, and make a case that educators must be prepared to analyze films alongside their students without nitpicking or “ruining” the movie. Then, provide example criteria that can be used in the classroom to evaluate a film’s usefulness as a historical source or teaching tool. Finally, to apply that criteria to a selection of more recent films to show a proof of concept. Overall, the goals of this project have been met, though the author has a few thoughts to share.

Film is art, some of the most dynamic. Film is a business, one of the most lucrative. Film is entertainment, enjoyed by millions every day. In the classroom, film is a tool that allows students and educators to view the world through a specific lens. Understanding that the things you see on film are not always accurate is part of growing up. Knowing how to critically analyze a film to recognize harmful engagement with the subject matter is a learned skill. One need not let this critical thinking destroy their moviegoing experience, it is more about using a crucial skill as a reflex to avoid allowing something intended as art and entertainment to negatively affect one’s understanding of the past. Not every film is *Birth of a Nation* which so flagrantly grates upon the majority of our 21st Century sensibilities, nor is every film a perfect source to be used in place of a textbook. Historical film does not teach, it supports learned material as an enjoyable secondary source. Engagement and analysis of film should be enjoyable as an exercise. Hopefully, this project has shown a simple way to achieve that.

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Appendix: Useful Sources

When evaluating a historical film there are varieties of reviews from both historians and film critics to consider. These kinds of reviews can be found through simple Google searches or engagement with something like JSTOR or EBSCOhost. But aside from professional reviews there are plenty of useful sources that students can use to help them understand the historical inaccuracies in film as well as just the average person who is curious. Below is a list of some of these sources that are useful in the discussion of specific films.

Books:

History Goes to the Movies – Joseph H. Roquemore

Roquemore's compilation is somehow both a continuation and improvement upon Carnes' below. Featuring a broader timeline of films, *History Goes to the Movies* still only features evaluations of films up to about 1999. A wonderful improvement over Carnes is the inclusion of a 0-5 star rating system for each film, based solely on its historical accuracy.

Past Imperfect – Mark C. Carnes

Though Carnes' later article where he seems less enthusiastic about identifying historical inaccuracy in film was a major impetus for this project, his work here is still incredible with the compiled evaluations of films. Each film is given its due and evaluated by a historian, making *Past Imperfect* a must have for anyone who finds this important.

Websites:

Based on a True True Story? – www.informationisbeautiful.net

This visualization graph compiles historical films and attempts to break them down scene by scene. Those who access the site can hover over a scene block that is deemed accurate or inaccurate, that also features a link to the cited source which gave that information.

History vs. Hollywood – www.historyvshollywood.com

This goal of this website is to engage with historical film. Films are divided into genres and broken-down bit by bit. For most films they feature a Reel vs Real face comparison between the actors and the people they were meant to portray, before then analyzing the major historical question people may have about the film

Internet Movie Database (IMDb) – www.imdb.com

A useful source for finding out most anything about a film, IMDb is especially useful for students as a jumping off point, much like Wikipedia. Most film pages here have a section for goofs and inaccuracies, and for historical films these generally include brief descriptions of where the film gets history wrong. Users should be careful not to get too wrapped up in the minutia here as IMDb will identify even the smaller, harmless inaccuracies directly alongside the larger issues.

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